

Stan's World

Songwriter pays tribute to boyhood idol Allen

by Stan Hockman, Philadelphia Daily News

Dick Allen used his cleats to write "MOM" in the dirt around first base, a tribute to one person who understood the anguish that bubbled like sulfuric acid inside him.

Wrote "COKE" as shorthand for the Coca-Cola sign atop Connie Mack Stadium's leftfield roof, the one fans expected him to clear every time up. Wrote "Oct. 1" for the date the season ended and he would be freed from the candy-red prison stripes of a Philies uniform.

Wrote "BOO," although the fans needed no encourage meet, not after he had that scuffle with Frank Thomas and wasn't permitted to tell his side of that ugly story.

Chuck Brodsky was 8 at the time. His dad brought him to the ballpark that year.

"I never understood why they would boo him," Brodsky recalled. "He was a home-run hitter, a great player. It has haunted me my whole life. I've never made peace with it.

"Years later, at the Hall of Fame, I went through the files. I found out about the incident with Frank Thomas. I began to understand. Back then, I'd ask my dad, he wouldn't say. I guess he thought I was too young to understand."

Brodsky is 38 now, a singer/songwriter living near Asheville, N.C. He's written a song called "Letters in the Dirt." Made it the title track of his new Red House Records CD. Got to tell Allen

about it in Cooperstown, N.Y., of all places.

"I was invited to do a concert at the Hall of Fame, last September," Brodsky said eagerly.

"Played a little show in the Bullpen Theatre. Dick Allen was in town, representing the Reading Phillies.

"The Eastern League was having its awards banquet. We went over to the Osaga hotel and there he was, standing in the lobby. I went over to him, told him he was my favorite ballplayer, told him I'd written a song as a tribute to him.

"Reached into the CD and showed him the (lyrics) booklet, where we'd re-created the "BOO" in the dirt. He reached over and pinched my cheek."

Brodsky grew up in Philadelphia's suburbs. Attended Haverford School. Enrolled at Penn State, left after a year.

"I remember Day 1 of orientation, the keynote speaker welcoming us to Penn State," Brodsky said. "And, outside the window there were two guys on the lawn, playing guitars, singing songs. I knew right then, that's what I wanted to do. I went out and got a guitar."

And soon after, he began an odyssey in search of himself. Picked oranges on a kibbutz in Israel, drove an ice cream truck worked as a bank courier, all the time filing away images and moments to be woven into the fabric of his songs.

"Lived in San Francisco for many years," Brodsky said. "And then came back to Philadelphia. Got a job at the Main Point. Began to get work as a singer-song writer. Deliberately avoided listening to people I thought were similar to me. I never wanted to copy anybody.

"I get compared to John Prine. I love his music. But I have never owned a John Prine album. And

I haven't listened to [Bob] Dylan in a long time."

Played some gigs in North Carolina, fell in love with the area, the pace, the people. Is still a Phillies fan. On a clear day, he can hear 1210-AM in Weaverville -Harry Kalas and Wheels and Andy Musser.

Wrote a song called "Lefty," about a pitcher hanging on, his fastball a memory:

He used to throw the heater

But the radar does not lie .. .

And now when Lefty lays one up there

You can kiss that thing goodbye.

It's based only partly on Steve Carlton, because Carlton never drifted back to the minors, but the passion is there in the verse that brags:

He could smoke you,

he could fool you

Throw a curve around your neck

He could paint one on the corner

He could fill the upper deck.

One song on "Letters in the Dirt" is called "The Ballad of Eddie Klepp" about a white ballplayer integrating the Negro Leagues, playing with the Cleveland Buckeyes.

"I was reading a book on Jackie Robinson," Brodsky explained "And there was this little footnote

about Eddie Klepp as the first of three white men who played in the old Negro Leagues.

"I called the Hall of Fame and got hold of Tim Wiles in the research department. Turned out he's a big folk music fan. He got me some information on Klepp and I wrote the song.

"And then a guy from the Washington Post came to see me perform and traced Klepp, found his widow, other relatives, and wrote a big story about him. Turns out, he wasn't that great a guy."

It has been 21 years since Allen swung that 42-ounce mace in anger. Do people recognize the name when Brodsky sings "Letters in the Dirt"?

"People are always coming up to me, saying they remember Dick Allen," Brodsky said. "They know what he was up against."

Older, wiser, world-weary now, Brodsky knows, too:

How could they call a guy a bum

After he'd just hit a home run.

That didn't make any sense to a kid

Now I've since found out all of these years later,

Now I know a lot more than I did

And if back then you knew, Daddy

Why all those other people booed

Thanks for letting me have my heroes as a kid.

Brodsky's next album will include a song about Moe Berg, the old catcher who might have done

some spy work for America before Pearl Harbor. Someday Brodsky hopes to have enough baseball songs for an album.

"I think I'm doing it right now," he said softly. "I look for the magic in it. I don't play music for the money. The payment covers my travel, gets me to leave my lovely home.

"I want to touch people, I get supreme joy out of someone coming up to me during the break, and see in their eyes that they mean what they're saying. Someone, for example, who was a kid when Allen was playing, and that the song really moved them.

"Or, after my funny material, that they laughed, that I made someone happy. I truly believe that I can continue on this path and have some sort of career success, but at the same time touch people. It had to be real.

"I'm not interested in commercialization, the art form of writing. I'm not trying to write pop songs. There's so much phoniness in the music business, I want nothing to do with that. I'd be happy just being a storyteller."

Dick Allen would understand two guys standing, outside the lines.